

Message Text

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SUBJECT: INTSUM 259 - FEBRUARY 23, 1977

1. ISRAEL. THE LABOR PARTY CONVENTION OPENED IN JERUSALEM YESTERDAY. TODAY, IT MOVES TO TEL AVIV FOR WORKING SESSIONS. THE FIRST ORDER OF BUSINESS WILL BE THE QUESTION OF ADMITTING AS VOTING DELEGATES THE 570 MEMBERS OF THE CENTRAL COMMITTEE. (THE ELIGIBILITY OF THESE PARTY FUNCTIONARIES WAS BROUGHT INTO QUESTION BY THE COURTS.) WE THINK IT LIKELY THAT THE CONVENTION WILL ADMIT THEM. RABIN AND PERES ARE SCHEDULED TO GIVE SPEECHES IN THE MORNING AND THE VOTING FOR LABOR'S PRIME MINISTERIAL CANDIDATE COULD BE COMPLETED AS EARLY AS LATE AFTERNOON.

2. RABIN AND PERES ARE THE ONLY TWO CANDIDATES, AND THEY ARE CONTINUING TO LINE UP LAST-MINUTE SUPPORT.

RABIN RECEIVED PUBLIC ENDORSEMENT FROM TWO LONG-TIME
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SUPPORTERS--GOLDA MEIR AND HISTADRUT SECRETARY GENERAL MESHEL. PERES WAS ENDORSED BY SHALOM LEVIN, WHO IS A

DOVISH KNESSET MEMBER FROM THE LABOR PARTY AND SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE 50,000-MEMBER NATIONAL TEACHER'S UNION, AS WELL AS, REPORTEDLY, BY ALL 96 ARAB DELEGATES TO THE PARTY CONVENTION.

3. ISRAEL'S "OPEN BRIDGES" POLICY WITH JORDAN AND ITS "GOOD FENCE" POLICY WITH LEBANON ARE BEGINNING TO BEAR FRUIT. ISRAELI CHRISTIAN ARABS CROSSED INTO SOUTHERN LEBANON THIS WEEK TO VISIT RELATIVES, AND REGULAR (TWICE-MONTHLY) BUS SERVICE WAS ESTABLISHED FROM ISRAEL TO SEVERAL LEBANESE BORDER VILLAGES. OF POSSIBLY GREATER SIGNIFICANCE, A DELEGATION OF ARAB NOTABLES LIVING IN ISRAEL CROSSED THE ALLENBY BRIDGE INTO JORDAN TO CONVEY TO KING HUSSEIN THE CONDOLENCES OF ISRAELI ARABS ON THE DEATH OF QUEEN ALIA. THIS WAS THE FIRST OFFICIAL DELEGATION OF ARABS WHO ARE ISRAELI CITIZENS EVER TO GO TO AN ARAB COUNTRY.

4. THE FACT THAT THE JORDANIANS APPROVED SUCH A VISIT HAS GREATLY PLEASED THE ISRAELIS. EMBASSY TEL AVIV BELIEVES THAT IT MAY SERVE AS A PRECEDENT FOR FUTURE CONTACTS. JORDAN'S GESTURE PROVIDES FURTHER RECOGNITION THAT IT CONSIDERS THE 500,000 ARABS WHO ARE ISRAELI CITIZENS AS PALESTINIANS; UNTIL RECENTLY, MOST ARABS REGARDED THOSE PALESTINIANS WHO STAYED BEHIND IN 1948 AS OUTCASTS. THIS ACTION ALSO UNDOUBTEDLY REFLECTS THE GROWING AWARENESS AMONG THE ISRAELI ARABS THAT, DESPITE THEIR ISRAELI CITIZENSHIP, THEY ARE VERY MUCH A PART OF THE ARAB NATION. (LIMITED OFFICIAL USE)

5. PALESTINIANS. THE PALESTINE NATIONAL COUNCIL (PNC) MEETING, SCHEDULED TO BEGIN MARCH 12 IN CAIRO, IS SLATED TO ELECT A NEW PLO EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE,
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ACCORDING TO A PALESTINIAN SOURCE OF EMBASSY DAMASCUS. THE RESULTS OF INTRA-PALESTINIAN MANEUVERINGS AT THIS MEETING AND THE PERSONS ELECTED AS LEADERS THERE ARE LIKELY TO DEFINE THE THRUST OF PALESTINIAN POLICIES FOR SOME TIME TO COME.

6. KHALID FAHUM HAS SAID THAT NO REAL COMPETITION FOR HIS POSITION AS PNC CHAIRMAN HAS EMERGED, ALTHOUGH AN ATTEMPT WAS MADE A MONTH AGO TO PUT FORWARD THE CANDIDACY OF FATAH MODERATE KHALID AL-HASAN. ARAFAT REPORTEDLY VETOED AL-HASAN'S BID, BUT FAHUM MAY BE LAYING THE GROUNDWORK FOR HIS OWN DEPARTURE. EMBASSY DAMASCUS SOURCE SAID FAHUM HAD INDICATED HE WAS "EXHAUSTED" FROM

THE CONTINUOUS ROUND OF POLITICKING AND MAY NOT RUN FOR REELECTION. IN THE SOURCE'S VIEW, THIS LINE REFLECTS LESS A DESIRE BY FAHUM TO STEP DOWN THAN AN INTENTION TO RETIRE IF STRONG OPPOSITION EMERGES, WHICH IS POSSIBLE GIVEN HIS REPUTATION AS "SYRIA'S MAN."

7. THE NEW PLO EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE WILL STILL BE HEADED BY ARAFAT AND WILL PROBABLY CONSIST OF 11-15 MEMBERS. FAHUM AND ARAFAT ARE BOTH SAID TO BE DISSATISFIED WITH ITS CURRENT COMPOSITION, PARTICULARLY WITH THE LACK OF EFFORT EXHIBITED BY SEVERAL OF THE SEVEN INDEPENDENTS NOW ON THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE. ACCORDING TO THE EMBASSY DAMASCUS SOURCE, FAHUM SAID THAT THE PLO WANTS TO REPLACE THESE INDEPENDENTS WITH MORE ACTIVE MEMBERS WHO MAY, UNLIKE THEIR PREDECESSORS, BELONG TO FEDAYEEN ORGANIZATIONS. SYRIA AND EGYPT WOULD OPPOSE SUCH A MOVE, HOWEVER, BECAUSE ASAD AND SADAT WANT TO DILUTE FEDAYEEN INFLUENCE ON PLO POLICY-MAKING.

8. IN ORDER TO ENSURE THAT AT LEAST SOME OF THE NEW PNC MEMBERS ARE RESPONSIVE TO HIS WISHES, ARAFAT HAS PERSONALLY SELECTED MANY OF THE CANDIDATES FROM AMONG
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TRADITIONAL PALESTINIAN VILLAGE AND CLAN LEADERS WHO, HE BELIEVES, WILL FOLLOW HIS MODERATE LEAD. HE IS SAID TO HAVE DELIBERATELY PASSED OVER YOUNGER "HOTHEADS" HE CANNOT CONTROL. (CONFIDENTIAL)

9. LEBANON. FIGHTING AND ARTILLERY DUELS CONTINUED YESTERDAY EAST OF MARJAYOUN. IN AN INDICATION THAT THE CHRISTIANS MAY PUSH THEIR OFFENSIVE FURTHER (WITH PROBABLE ISRAELI URGING), JERUSALEM RADIO REPORTED THAT THE CHRISTIANS WERE PLANNING TO ADVANCE FURTHER INTO THE ARQOUB AND WERE PREPARING TO "COMPLETE THEIR DEFENSE BELT", HINTING THAT AN ATTACK MAY BE LAUNCHED ON BINT JBAYL.

10. JERUSALEM RADIO ALSO CLAIMED YESTERDAY THAT THE SYRIANS WERE HELPING THE PALESTINIANS TO MOVE ADDITIONAL FORCES INTO THE ARQOUB. THE REPORT SAID THAT PALESTINIAN STRENGTH THERE NOW WAS 2,000 MEN AND WAS INCREASING DAILY AND ALLEGED THAT SYRIAN TROOPS WERE ALLOWING THE PALESTINIANS TO BRING IN ADDITIONAL EQUIPMENT AND HEAVY ARMS. THE BROADCAST ADDED THAT PALESTINIAN STRENGTH WAS INCREASING ELSEWHERE ALONG THE BORDER AS WELL. (OUR TEL AVIV DEFENSE ATTACHE REPORTED THAT THE IDF IS CONCERNED OVER THE MOVEMENT OF 100 VEHICLES TO ARNUN THE NIGHT OF FEBRUARY 20, WHICH MAY BE RELATED TO THIS PALESTINIAN BUILD-UP.) (CONFIDENTIAL)

11. SYRIA. SYRIA HAS BEEN ATTEMPTING TO REDUCE ITS VULNERABILITY TO SOVIET PRESSURES BY DIVERSIFYING ITS SOURCES OF ARMS SUPPLY AND REDUCING THE SOVIET ADVISORY PRESENCE, AN EFFORT UNDOUBTEDLY ENCOURAGED BY BOTH EGYPT

AND SAUDI ARABIA. ASAD RESENTED THE PRESSURES THE SOVIETS
PUT ON HIM LAST YEAR TO FOREGO OR LIMIT HIS MILITARY
CAMPAIGN IN LEBANON. WHILE THE RELATIONSHIP IMPROVED
SOMEWHAT FOLLOWING THE CESSATION OF FIGHTING IN
NOVEMBER, THERE HAVE BEEN INTERMITTENT REPORTS SINCE THAT
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TIME OF SYRIAN DISPLEASURE WITH THE SOVIETS.

12. IT WOULD BE PREMATURE, HOWEVER, TO EXPECT ASAD
TO TRY TO ELIMINATE SOVIET INFLUENCE FROM SYRIA IN THE
IMMEDIATE FUTURE TO THE DEGREE THAT SADAT HAS DONE IN
EGYPT. AS LONG AS SYRIAN FORCES ARE ACTIVELY INVOLVED
IN LEBANON AND IN THE ABSENCE OF ANY FURTHER AGREEMENT
ON THE GOLAN HEIGHTS, SYRIA MUST MAINTAIN A DEGREE OF
MILITARY PREPAREDNESS THAT AT PRESENT ONLY THE SOVIETS
CAN PROVIDE. THIS WILL BE ESPECIALLY TRUE OVER THE
COMING MONTHS.

13. THIS WOULD BE AN AWKWARD TIME IN THE PEACE PROCESS
FOR ASAD TO TAMPER WITH SYRIAN-SOVIET RELATIONS.
ALTHOUGH COMMITTED TO NEGOTIATIONS WHICH HE UNDERSTANDS
DEPEND PRIMARILY ON US GOOD OFFICES, ASAD IS CURRENTLY
ENGAGED IN AN IMPLICITLY COOPERATIVE EFFORT WITH THE
SOVIETS TO FORCE THE PLO TO MODERATE ITS BASIC POSITIONS.
IN ADDITION, IF NEGOTIATIONS DO RESUME IN GENEVA, ASAD
WILL FIND THE PRESENCE OF A FRIENDLY SOVIET CO-CHAIRMAN
USEFUL IN KEEPING THE PALESTINIAN ISSUE IN FOCUS AND IN
CHECKING ANY EGYPTIAN TENDENCY TO COMPROMISE TOO READILY.

14. FROM THE SOVIET PERSPECTIVE, SYRIA'S IMPORTANCE HAS
GROWN WITH THE FURTHER DETERIORATION OF SOVIET-EGYPTIAN
RELATIONS AND THE SETBACK TO PLO PRESTIGE AND AUTHORITY
RESULTING FROM THE DEBACLE IN LEBANON. ASAD KNOWS
THIS, OF COURSE, AND HAS CAPITALIZED ON THE USSR'S
"DEPENDENCE" TO GAIN SOME ROOM FOR MANEUVER. NEVERTHELESS,
THE SOVIETS PROBABLY CALCULATE THAT THEY CAN MAINTAIN
A PRETTY STRONG POSITION IN SYRIA, WITH THEIR POTENTIAL
FOR CAUSING HIM SERIOUS DIFFICULTIES BY MANIPULATING
ARMS SUPPLIES AND ECONOMIC AND TRADE TIES. (SECRET)
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